IRCA ARTICLES
Behavior

Consequences, Behavior, and My Birds

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Though my pet birds have not created a formal behavior plan for me, they do a wonderful job of using consequences to increase the behaviors that they want me to do more often and to reduce the frequency of those behaviors they would rather I did not do. They have learned to elicit certain behaviors from me by using different consequences. If two cockatiels can use consequences to increase desired behavior and to decrease undesired behavior, just think how successful you will be!

I use the example of my cockatiels to explain four types of consequences, while including suggestions for using consequences when working with students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD).

Positive Reinforcement

When I left the house once, I said, "Bye, Gerta. Bye, Simon". The cockatiels each gave a small chirp in reply. I thought it was very cute that my pets were communicating with me. So cute, in fact, that I do not leave the house anymore without talking to the birds. Their little chirps increased the likelihood of my saying goodbye when I leave the house in the future.

The consequences (chirping) to my words were positive reinforcers. Simon and Gerta used positive reinforcement, which is the addition of something to the environment that makes a behavior more likely to occur. If the birds had not responded when I spoke to them, I would never have started saying "goodbye" on a consistent basis.

Positive reinforcement is especially effective. However, if not used carefully, it and other consequences can have unintended effects on behavior. Allie, for example, is an adorable and energetic six-year old student with ASD who loves to hear others clap their hands. To reinforce sitting behavior in the classroom, Allie's teacher decided to clap her hands and say "Nice sitting!" when Allie was quietly seated during instructional periods. The first time the teacher clapped and said "Nice sitting!" Allie stood up and walked to the window. Each time her teacher tried to positively reinforce sitting behavior, Allie stood up. Over time, Allie began to spend less time in her seat.

Clearly, clapping and saying "Nice sitting!" is not a positive reinforcer for Allie's sitting behavior because it does not make sitting more likely to occur. Even when consequences are things that a child normally enjoys, if they do not increase the likelihood of the desired behavior, they are not positive reinforcers. In Allie's case, the teacher's consequences for sitting became punishment because they actually made sitting less likely to occur.

Conversely, seemingly negative events can be positively reinforcing. For example, when a student engages in attention-seeking behavior, yelling or other traditionally negative consequences can make a behavior more likely to occur. Tim illustrates a common example of this phenomenon. One day Tim kicked another student. As a consequence, the teacher pulled him aside and spoke to him at length about why he should not kick others. After the lecture, Tim was required to sit next to the teacher. Over time, Tim began to kick more often. Tim now knows that he will receive individual attention from his teacher when he kicks other students. Even though the teacher is upset and unsmiling, Tim seeks this attention. The consequences (in this case, negative attention) have become positively reinforcing for Tim's kicking behavior.

For students across the autism spectrum, verbally requesting attention may be challenging or impossible. Engaging in disruptive or aggressive behaviors that elicit attention from a teacher or other adult may be a much easier

alternative.

Positive Punishment

When a new feather grows on a cockatiel, it is covered by a plastic-like casing and can be quite painful for the bird when touched. While petting my cockatiels, they let me know when I have hit a sensitive area by screeching. This unpleasant noise lets me know quite clearly that I must quit what I am doing. Because I do not like the noise, I am less likely to pet the new, plastic-like feathers in the future. Screeching is effective punishment because it makes my undesired behavior (petting the new feathers) less likely to occur in the future.

Positive punishment involves adding something to the environment that makes the behavior less likely to occur. In this case, the birds used screeching to reduce the frequency of my new feather petting behavior.

Though my birds found positive punishment to be highly effective, they would have had even more success with positive reinforcement alone. Research indicates that interventions using positive reinforcement are more effective than those using positive punishment. Positive punishments like yelling have no place in a behavior plan for students with ASD. The only exception to this rule is when the child is in danger. If a student is about to run into the street, a firm "NO!" may save his life. The novelty of the sound may stop him in his tracks. If a student is often spoken to in loud, harsh voices, however, he becomes immune to such an approach and is unlikely to respond in an emergency.

Negative Reinforcement

Sometimes the birds want my attention when I am busy with something else. They yell for me. Having heard this sound many times, I realize that it will quit when I enter the room and open their cage. The longer I ignore the yelling, the louder it gets. When I can't take it anymore, I let the birds out of their cage and the yelling stops. Not only have the birds used negative reinforcement to escape the cage, but also I have positively reinforced their yelling by entering the room and releasing them from their cage!

Negative reinforcement is the removal of an undesired stimulus when the target behavior occurs. I hate to hear the yelling and will gladly engage in the desired behavior to put it to an end. An obvious example of negative reinforcement is the beeping noise that the car makes when first started. The noise ceases when the driver's seat belt is buckled. The driver escapes the annoying beeping noise, and is thus more likely to quickly fasten her seatbelt in future situations.

Negative Punishment

Spoiled beyond belief, Simon and Gerta demand my full attention when they are out of the cage and riding on my shoulder. They don't like it if I am reading a book or talking on the phone while they are perched on me. Though the birds may be cuddling quite sweetly when they have my full attention, as soon as I begin to read or speak to a friend, they will back away from me. By backing away from me, the birds remove something I enjoy (cuddles) in order to make my distracted behavior less likely to occur.

Negative punishment is the removal of a desired event that makes an undesired behavior less likely to occur. Grounding is an often-used example of negative punishment. Parents hope that loss of fun privileges will result in lower rates of staying out past curfew.

Hopefully, these anecdotes illustrate how consequences shape behavior, even when the individual issuing the consequences has little or no knowledge of behavioral techniques. Behavior change happens constantly, whether intended or not. Deliberate use of consequences can help create lasting, positive change in the behavior of students with autism spectrum disorders.

Loftin, R. (2002). Consequences, behavior, and my birds. The Reporter, 8(1), 16-18.